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AUTHOR Inglis, Paul
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ABSTRACT

A 135-item survey was administered to 279 students enrolled in tertiary distance education programs in Queensland, Australia. The study was intended to identify (1) factors that are highly predictive of positive and independent learning growth and (2) strategies that students and educators can adopt to help students achieve a high level of affinity with their distance study program. The following demographic factors were found to be predictive of high affective development: being 46 years old or older; living in the largest urban centers; experiencing the influence of family, physical handicap, and employment; and having 10 or more hours of leisure time. Living as a single adult with children and working 46 or more hours per week were predictive of negative affective development. Previous learning variables that were highly predictive of positive affective development by students were these: (1) studying continuously for periods from 1 to 10 years; and (2) having gained qualifications. Present learning variables that appeared predictive of positive affective development included experiencing a moderate effect for socioeconomic conditions, making one or more visits to the institution, having great study expectations, having personal development reasons for studying, studying in various places, and studying more than 10 hours per week. It appeared that the search for a suitable teaching model should be replaced by a mix of teaching and learning behaviors that will promote effective student control over their own learning. (MN)

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# DISTANCE TEACHING IS DEAD! LONG LIVE DISTANCE LEARNING!

or 'Autonomy in Distance Learning'

Paul Inglis

Post Graduate Student, School of External Studies
University of Queensland.

56th ANZAAS Conference, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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# DISTANCE TEACHING IS DEAD! LONG LIVE DISTANCE LEARNING!

## or 'Autonomy in Distance Learning'

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### Preamble

I believe we are on the edge of a break-through in the achievement of effective student autonomy in tertiary distance education. The proliferation of research towards this end; the expressed goals of courses for D.E. teachers in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, North America and Africa; a growth of concern about the social contexts of learning; government strategies to overcome inequalities in access to higher education and greater understanding of how students learn are fueling this belief.

The previous pre-occupation has been with discovering techniques for effectively transferring on-campus teaching skills into the homes of individuals using models of teaching and learning that have been reasonably adaptable to distance study, but only in a fairly structured form (Ausubel,1963 and 1978; Bruner,1971; Peters,1983; Sims,1972; Skinner,1953 and others ). This is being challenged by a focus on the "learner's responsibility for him-/herself with the aim of having a 'comprehensive personal experience '(Binder, Dauber et al.,1975:17) " (Schwittman, 1982 :155).

Most of the concentration in this new perspective has been on the cognitive processes used by students in independent learning at a distance and how to discover and cater for the individual differences in study techniques based on the students' preferred cognitive processes (Dodds and Lawrence,1983; Kirby,1980; Dahloff,1977; Wedemeyer,1973; Willen,1979 and others). My explorations have been into the complementary affective processes which theoretically promote autonomy. (Bloom,1974; Schwittman,1982; Heinze,1983; Elton,1978; Entwistle,1978; Delling,1975 and others).

One of the bi-products of my research, which I want to share with you, is an heuristic for developing autonomous learning in D.E. through assisting and promoting affective growth.

Sadly, if given the choice, most distance students would prefer to attend colleges and universities rather than study by correspondence (Heinze,op cit: 56). The search for a theory of distance teaching that will offer an approach that will satisfy the learning styles of all students in all the imaginable subject areas is an impossibility (Holmberg,1985; Horsford, 1973).

Horsford explains the difficulty as one of being

> "necessarily impossible to determine an absolute set of instructional procedures that will be "best" for different learners, or for different learnings by one learner" (ibid).

Holmberg points out the futility of attempting a cause/effect type of theory of distance education as human beings are involved and the many idiosyncratic factors that come into play make it problematic to apply universal rules. He does, however, produce 'theory generating hypotheses' (op cit: 7). All of his general assumptions or 'hypotheses' about effective distance teaching include strong elements of student initiated learning activity.

## Knowing About Student Learning Styles

Although student learning appears to be a pre-eminent concern of leading distance educators, Baath has found that institutions know very little about how their students learn (ibid: 2) including little information about what motivates them, what previous learning experiences they have had, how much external study they have done, what their close physical and human environments are like, how long they spend on study, their preferred evaluation mode....in essence their degree of independence in learning.

A variety of study methods and learning styles has been a common finding in the literature (Brew,1978; Roberts,1985; Taylor, Morgan and Gibbs,1980; Martin and Saljo,1976; Pask,1976 ; Marland et al,1983).

It appears that a key to achieving sufficient flexibility in distance programs to cater for the apparent diversity of learning styles, motivations and goals is to empower the students to greater responsibility for their studies, to recognise what has been apparent in andragogy for some time and to identify strategies which will promote this student empowerment. Such has been my task.

## My Research into Affective Processes

The purpose of my study was to explore the broad milieu of a large group of external students and ascertain whether the promotion of affective elements in adult distance learning is a predictor of their personal feelings of autonomy and success. At the same time, the research identified strategies which students on the one hand and educators on the other can adopt for the achievement of a high level of student affinity with the program of distance study.

The thesis takes the form of a chronology of events in the investigation with the unfolding of evidence in hermeneutic style

and application of this information to subsequent stages of the investigation. The core of the study was a survey of 279 students where 135 questions were posed about their learning experiences.

This has been analysed to produce evidence of factors which give a high prediction of positive and independent learning growth. This data is supported by anecdotal, and qualitative information gathered in the field as well as information provided by the distance education literature.

## Method

I have adopted the Harre and Secord (1973) approach to gathering information on the social behaviour of people. Their advocacy of actually asking people what they do and think is also consistent with the ethnographic ethic (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) of giving the participants ownership of the data that they provide. Moreover, my research has been into the students' own perceptions of their levels of autonomy and affective development and therefore observer inferences are of secondary significance. The interpretation of this evidence is mine with reference to a range of contemporary studies that focus on similar issues to the ones raised in my investigation. Some of the prediction factors were:

## Predicting High Affective Growth

### Demographic Variables

The combination of demographic predictors for perceived high affective development in this study were:

. being 46 years or older;
. living in the largest urban centre; followed by living in areas of medium population density;
. experiencing the influence of family, physical handicap, location and employment to varying degrees.

and

. having 10 or more hours of leisure.

There were two factors recorded as having a negative influence:

. living as a single adult with children;

and

. working for 46 or more hours a week.

### Previous Learning Variables

Previous learning experiences which, in combination contributed to the prediction were:

. having been studying continuously for periods from one to ten

years, with the most significant continuity predictor being continuity from 1 to 3 years;

and

. having gained qualifications with levels of prediction decreasing through a part degree or diploma, matriculation and a degree.

At the same time three factors in this category were contributing negatively to the development:

. experiencing a moderate or great enjoyment of study
. having achieved other post secondary qualifications
and
. experiencing a moderate effect from age.

Present Learning Variables

Present learning variables combining to assist the prediction were:

. experiencing a moderate effect from socio-economic condition
. the number of units being studied at one time
. having a study place set aside
. feeling that nothing else is as important as study
. study is effecting personal health
. the student will make one or more visits to the institution
. study time will be distributed mostly as reading and note-taking
. having great personal study expectations
. having personal development reasons for studying
. studying in various places (e.g. work, home, library)
. being effected by personal study habits
. studying for more than ten hours a week
. feeling that friends will have to adjust to this study
. experiencing little effect from other interests
and
. needing to relax before studying.

Andragogical Factors Related to Student Feelings

Many of the factors contributing to high affective development can be sourced to the students themselves. In combination, they contribute to the prediction of high affective development as follows:

. having a personal feeling of being very or moderately successful
. feeling very or moderately self-motivated
. feeling moderately or very successful at referencing skills
. when faced with a problem, contacts the lecturer or tutor

. moderately successful at meeting deadlines
. finding study easier and more purposeful now than in previous experiences of study
. very keen to have fellow student contact.

Two factors in this category were acting negatively on the affective development of distance students:

. being successful at note-taking;
and
. calling on another person, not a lecturer or tutor for assistance when faced with a problem.

## An Heuristic for Developing Student Autonomous Learning in D.E. through Affective Growth

Dodds and Lawrence (op cit) have shown, as have others, that the subjects of their study at Murdoch had different goals from the academics who taught them or prepared their course of study. Further, they have shown that the students' own goals influenced the way they planned and organized their study. They consequently put a case for more detailed knowledge about the students' own cognitve processes (p41).

My study produces evidence to support the monitoring and sponsoring of the affective processes in student growth. The important message of the heuristic which I have developed as an instrument for assisting this development is that true autonomy of learning implies "students who are cognitively active as well as affectively involved" (Howard,1985: 172). No effort on the part of the institution to promote autonomy should reduce this metacognitive power of individual students to control their own destinies. Therefore, ideally, the heuristic should be an instrument for student self-analysis and for sharing with the lecturer so that the shared understanding will promote lecturer and student initiatives to compensate for or enhance the student's learning milieu.

AN HEURISTIC FOR PROMOTING AUTONOMY IN DISTANCE LEARNING

1. ANALYSIS OF DEMOGRAPHIC STATUS

   Age, population density of residence, family situation, leisure time, hours of employment.

2. ANALYSIS OF PREVIOUS LEARNING

   Length and continuity of previous study, qualifications gained, level of enjoyment of study, other post-secondary qualifications.

3. ANALYSIS OF PRESENT LEARNING EXPERIENCES

   Socio-economic condition, quantity of units being

studied, desire to do more external study, having a set study place, importance of study, desire to visit institution, distribution of study time, personal study expectations, rating of personal development, personal study habits, study hours, influence of friends, influence of other interests and possibilities for relaxing before study.

4. ANDRAGOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS

Level of feelings of success, capability for self-motivation, skill at referencing, desire to share problems with tutor/lecturer, success at meeting deadlines, degree of difficulty and purposefulness of study, and desire to have fellow student contact.

My study has also produced an institutional heuristic which includes an analysis of lecturer-based, resource-based and other support factors which have shown significant predictive quality for the development of high affective growth.

Conclusion

This has not been so much a case for depowering the institutions that control the study programs of adult students, but instead for assisting the part-time D.E. student who is committed to a lifestyle, a family, usually a job and usually with clear goals which are linked to employment.

The traditional teaching models that have been adapted to D.E. have not satisfied the diversity of needs and learning styles of these adult distance students. The search for a suitable teaching model should therefore be replaced by a mix of teaching and learning behaviours that will promote effective student control over their learning.

Distance learning can be cooperative learning. The development of an effective partnership between the student and lecturer, the promotion of student-centre reflexivity; the negotiation of the learning experience and the essential dialectic of growth fostering forces and growth discouraging forces (Egan,1985: 36) are problems which confront distance education where it is easier to imagine students as being the passive recipients of institutionally determined and pre-packaged material. The recognition of a desirable learning process is often overshadowed by the economic and technical necessities and efficiencies. Positive lecturer/student relationships are subsumed by the cost and difficulty of implementing strategies for process approaches to learning. However, in the past, strategies have emphasised the focus of control and determination of the ground rules for cooperation and have failed to exploit the current state of the student's desire to grow attitudinally.

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